



ESSAY SERIES - ESSAY 6

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ARMED FORCES

Humanity has grown and evolved over thousands of years into a close-knit society in which we all have an important role to play. History is rife with stories of great human figures who were catapulted to heroic status, and some even gained God-like position. But all of these people have something in common. They were almost all men. We rarely see female figures, except for a few who could make inroads into the global patriarchy. Women have always been seen as second fiddle to men. Their involvement had always been limited to bearing children, taking care of household work, and undoubtedly attending to her father and, later, her spouse. Except for a few communities, the female child has always been placed second in comparison to her male sibling, who are better nourished, educated, and always receive the finest of the resources available.

However, the last century has seen many changes, particularly in the last two decades. There seems to be an increase in the number of women taking on obligations and playing an active role in fields that were previously thought to be the domain of men. Time has favoured the female gender in particular. Kudos to the education systems, developing facilities, technical advances, and, of course, economic liberalisation.

Women have long dominated the academic, healthcare, hospitality, telecommunications, and information technology sectors, but they have recently begun to make inroads into the so-called macho domain of the armed forces. Conventionally, even the reference of women fighting with arms made people uneasy. Only men were thought to be fit for combat, and women were regarded as outliers. However, this has been proven to be an archaic notion.

Women were originally inducted into the British Indian Army as Military Nursing officers in 1927 and as medical officers in 1943 to care for troops, families, and the general public during deployments. They, however, have begun to express themselves in recent years. They believe that men and women should have equal access to all possibilities, and they have proven their worth in every sector. The Supreme Court's recent decision in *Secretary of the Ministry of Defence vs. Babita Puniya & Ors.*, to provide Permanent Commissions (Pc) to women officers on Short Service Commission (SSC) as their male counterparts in the armed forces will go a long way toward changing the perception of gender bias against women.

The decision was based on a lawsuit filed by 17 female SSC officers who were refused PC and fired after serving for 14 years as SSC officers. The women would be entitled to permanent commission in select army cadres, according to another court bench chaired by Justice DY Chandrachud. They will now be able to command entire military units as a result of the court's decision. The court also observed that women officers have worked shoulder to shoulder with their men counterparts in every walk of service. Therefore, the "101 excuses" devised by the government, including motherhood and physiological limitations, reeked of a stereotypical mindset. And women naval officers cannot be denied the right to equal opportunity and dignity entitled to under the Constitution on specious grounds such as physiology, motherhood and physical attributes.

The implications of this decision are such that women naval officers will now be eligible to apply for permanent commission, all serving women short service commission (SSC) officers in at least seven wings, including the executive, engineering, electrical, education, law and logistics, will be eligible to apply and the grant of PCs will be subject to:

1. Availability of vacancies in the stabilized cadre

2. Suitability of the candidate
3. Recommendation by the chief of Naval Staff

The Army, Air Force, and Navy did not begin inducting women as Short Service Commission officers until 1992. Women were allowed to join the military for the first time outside of the medical field, and there are now over 9500 women serving in the military. They've carved out a niche for themselves in the Indian Air Force (IAF) as fighter pilots and administrators in support services. Five paramilitary units known as the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) includes women in combat roles. Women are being allowed to work in positions ranging from constable to direct entry officers. They now account for more than 5 percent of these organisations. In the coming days, the government expects women to make up 33 percent in the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), as well as 15 percent in the Border Security Force (BSF), Service Selection Board (SSB), and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police ITBP.

Women have come a long way in the Armed Forces and have kept up with the times. But there is still so much to be done. Women's power must be assimilated into all aspects of the military, including combat, administration, and medicine. Recognizing women's power and allowing them to reach their full potential is the obligation of both the government and society at large. We need to develop a plan that includes societal reforms, as well as the acceptance and inclusion of women in all aspects of life.